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ABSTRACT

There are growing numbers of students enrolling in university-level English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) courses who are not international students but are products of American K-12 bilingual education programs. These immigrant or refugee ESL learners are not required to demonstrate a specified level of English language competence by scoring 500 or higher on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL); their American high school diplomas are considered proof enough of English language competence. There is reason to believe that the needs of and level of proficiency of these students are different from the typical international student, but there is little empirical data. This paper is an attempt to draw a clearer picture of one immigrant learner's English literacy development ("Jeng-Da," a Chinese immigrant) and his initiation into the university. It is hoped that his experiences will shed some light on the curriculum needs of the growing numbers of immigrant ESL students at American universities. It is concluded that L2 language proficiency should be measured for immigrants in a way comparable to that which is done for international students; strategies for academic achievement should be explicitly taught to provide a sort of scaffolding during the transition from survival to academic English; and instructors should be made aware of the likely enormous familial and societal demands on immigrant students, pressures that international students are less likely to face. (KFT)

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One Immigrant Student's Literacy Journey to the University

ED 444 363

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With the influx of second language learners into our elementary and secondary schools, the number of ESL students embarking on university education in America is increasing. This growth signals a need for reassessing the backgrounds of students enrolling in university level ESL composition courses.

Students who come to America solely to study are typically classified as international students. These students must matriculate with at least a 500 on the TOEFL or an 80 on the MELAB to enter the university[1]. Unlike the international ESL students, refugee or immigrant students who currently maintain permanent residency in America are often not required to take these tests nor submit evidence of their English language background as evidence of an American high school diploma is deemed sufficient. Upon enrollment in State University, however, both classifications of ESL students are required as non-native English speakers to take an English language placement test which may either place them in post-admissions ESL composition courses or qualify them to immediately enroll in Freshman Composition. Although steps have been taken to group immigrant students together in these courses--presuming similar needs--in comparison to the international students, relatively little is actually known about the immigrant learners' language proficiency and educational backgrounds with the exception of high school grade transcripts which can vary erratically and possibly SAT or ACT scores.

This paper is an attempt to draw a clearer picture of one immigrant learner's English literacy development and his initiation in to the university. Perhaps this deeper insight into one immigrant's ESL background will help university EAP programs to better tailor curriculum to the needs of the new ESL university students: the immigrants[2]. At minimum, this paper will hopefully engage program administrators and teachers to take a similar look at their own students' backgrounds.

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[1]All place and individual names are pseudonyms in this paper in order to preserve the case subject's confidentiality; however, curriculum requirements have been preserved in order to better describe the authenticity of this learning context.

[2] Throughout this paper the term "immigrant" will be loosely used to define any domestic ESL student who has permanently relocated to the U.S. in either refugee or immigrant status and who has experienced some schooling in the United States.

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The Subject:

The subject in this study (hereafter referred to as "Jeng-Da") is currently enrolled in State University as a pre-engineering/undecided major. He matriculated into the large public university in the fall of 1995. At the time of this study, Jeng-Da was enrolled in the second (107U) of a three level ESL composition series in a special "immigrant-designated" section with this researcher as his instructor. Jeng-Da was selected for this study because of his willingness to volunteer for such an endeavor, because of his immigrant status and "typical" projections of immigrant learner issues (Ferris 1999) and, moreover, because of his overwhelming attitude for cooperation and enthusiasm in this undertaking.

The Role of Researcher:

My role as researcher in the development of this ESL portrait is multi-faceted. I am Jeng-Da's teacher; I am the data gatherer, and I am the prober--probing him with endless questions for more detailed and deeper descriptions. In an effort to counter my pedagogical bias, I have collected text samples from Jeng-Da's past courses; I have observed him in a content area course, I have interviewed him on four occasions, and I have elicited numerous written responses from him in "Reflection Notes." I have, however, not neglected to take advantage of my insight as his instructor and my being privy to class observations, tutorials, and writing samples.

Data Collection:

With the data that I have collected, I will attempt to draw a thick description of Jeng-Da's English literacy history and development. Part of my description mirrors Brandt's collection of literacy autobiographies in "Remembering." Similarly, several of my questions posed to Jeng-Da reflect Janopoulos's study (1986) on pleasure reading. I will compose my portrait of Jeng-Da based on information gathered from one informal introductory interview, three audio-taped interviews, two audio-taped tutorials, four series of elicited questions designed as opportunities for reflection about his L2

literacy (hereafter called "Reflection Notes"), a four year collection of writing samples, daily informal ESL class observation, one content class observation, and copies of required reading texts from two of his university classes. All data were collected within a six week period of time while Jeng-Da was enrolled in 107U; however, the writing samples he has provided range from 1992 to the present.

Subject's History:

The events which led Jeng-Da to enroll as a Freshman in State University began several years ago. Jeng-Da came to the United States with his parents and sister on February 24, 1992, after a decade long struggle with immigration and visa processing. They came here not as strangers but as extended members of a family already located in our city. At that time Jeng-Da was 15 years old. He had already finished eight years of school in his home country, China, where he studied Chinese literature, math, and science. Two years before leaving China, Jeng-Da began studying English in his school. Upon his arrival in the USA, Jeng-Da enrolled in the ninth grade in high school. For one year, Jeng-Da attended ESL courses in school before being transferred to mainstream English courses. Then in 1995, Jeng-Da graduated from high school and in the fall matriculated in SU as an undergraduate. At that time, Jeng-Da took the ESL Composition departmental placement exam and was placed into the first of a three part course series: 106U. In this course, Jeng-Da joined thirteen other immigrant students with similar ESL language experiences. At the time of this study, Jeng-Da had progressed to 107U. In addition to ESL, Jeng-Da was enrolled in Economics 200 and Math 148. Furthermore, while enrolled in the university, Jeng-Da balanced two part time jobs with his studies.

Subject's Literacy Background:

Jeng-Da's literacy background is similar to his 107U classmates. He is fluent and literate in his native Chinese. Similarly, his earliest memories of writing in Chinese are of struggling to learn to write Chinese characters when he was about eight or nine years old. His earliest memories of learning to write in English are of trying to write the twenty-six letter alphabet. In reference to writing in Chinese, Jeng-Da claims to still write more in his native language than in English. He says that mostly he writes letters to

his friends and family back home in China. Writing in English is something he has to do in order to complete homework assignments, get good grades, and help his family in managing household matters. Likewise, Jeng-Da reads in English in order to keep up with lectures, finish assignments, and follow current events in the news. For pleasure reading, Jeng-Da would choose a newspaper or a comic book, but he would prefer to watch TV to relax (Interview 2/8/96).

When asked to describe his native language, Jeng-Da draws out the sense of community the Chinese language defines for him: "Native language is the kind of language that for people who grows in the place to understand more better than people who comes for other place" (Free Write 2/5/96). Similarly he defines his role as a writer in Chinese: "Writing in Chinese give me more chance to talk to the people who doesn't know in English, and it is also part of my social life here in America" (Reflective notes 2/13/96). In contrast, his role as reader and writer of English is a lot less positive: "At first, I was don't like English and it was a lot of pressure to learn English, but after three years in America I was kind of getting more interesting in learning English as my second language" (Reflective Notes 2/13/96).

Interestingly enough, when asked to describe what it means for a person to be literate in English and in Chinese, Jeng-Da encompasses both languages in his description: "A person who is literate in English and Chinese, which means he/she is knowledgeable in every aspect of studies. He/She can thinking and create new ideas for every aspect of studies. He/she is to be able to get involve and handle the work in every study fields" (Reflective Notes 3/2/96).

In a description of his own English literacy development at the beginning of his 107U course, Jeng-Da described himself:

> As a writer in English, I feel that I have the hard time to organize the ideas and to jot it down on a list before to do the writing. Sometime on a essay that I have to change the thesis statement; the reason is that the body paragraphs on the essay that were good to explain something else that were less important than to explain the thesis statement. I also feel that I don't have well developed paragraphs on writing a essay; things that were mixed up together on the same paragraph that were not relate to each other. I think that I have focus on explain

> something on the writing. On some essay that I know how to started to write, but I don't know to closed to the end.

As a reader he described himself:

> As a reader in English, I think that I understand most parts of the story that I had read, but sometime couldn't understand the whole story; sometime I know some parts of the story, but put it together that become strange for me to understand. (Reading Writing Self Profile 1/4/96).

Based upon these literacy descriptions and Jeng-Da's definition of the necessitating roles writing and reading in English define for him, one can begin to see the development of his sense for English as a whole language system. He still sees himself, however, within this system as a person subjected to haphazard piecing together in an effort to make sense of the language and move forward towards task completion. I have hypothesized that Jeng-Da's development in English literacy has been more a process of learning to survive in the L2 environment than developing academic English skills. Furthermore, I would like to posit that the development he has made thus far has been limited by the tasks that he has been required to fulfill. I would like to now explore how his L2 literacy developed as such and what might lie in store for his future English development in academia.

Literacy Orientation and Influences:

My presumption that Jeng-Da's English literacy has initially developed out of a fundamental need to survive in the L2 environment is based on several influences on his life.

Of primary importance is the extenuating factor of Jeng-Da's immigration to an English environment at age 15. Jeng-Da was thrown into an environment completely foreign to him, yet he recognized early on that this was a permanent change in his life. "I was try to accept the fact that which I was going to study in that school for years and got use to it" (Reflection Notes 3/2/96). In order to adjust to this new environment, Jeng-Da had to face the challenges of communicating in a language he did not speak, he had to learn a new culture, and yet he had to balance this with his role as a literate Chinese speaker. In addition, unlike most of the international students who are enrolled in the university, Jeng-Da had the delicate responsibility of managing to learn a new language while being completely involved in

his L1 setting: paradoxically, his family both shelters him in a miniature Chinese culture yet forces him to go forth and solve English language problems for them. Furthermore, Jeng-Da has elected to continue his education in the university and so must rise to the challenges of surviving his college courses taught in his L2. Jeng-Da describes these responsibilities:

> Because I living in America, I have to take care of my family matters and problems and for my own good to know the different languages and their culture. The goals are going to school and working to learn more about the language and its culture, because I living in America, I need to know it better (Reflection Notes 2/13/96).

These are the influences working over his life, which have both thrown him into this L2 environment completely unprepared where he "don't even know how to speak one word" (Interview 2/8/96), forced him to survive on the "American dreams that I have got through all these years of living here" (Reflection Notes 3/2/96), and led him to enroll in my university ESL composition course.

Although Jeng-Da's current English literacy may not yet be embraced by the university discourse community, his motivation to push forward towards a higher L2 literacy level is evident in the progress he has made as a writer and reader in English over the past four years. Yet, almost contradictory to his drive to improve, in examining Jeng-Da's past text samples, it seems that the nature of his L2 development parallels the input he has received. When writing tasks demanded one word answers, he supplied them. When, however, more was asked of him, he produced more. Likewise, with his reading tasks, when presented with children's stories he read them. However, when presented with Shakespeare, he read Shakespeare. It is this sporadic course of Jeng-Da's English literacy history that I wish to now explore.

History of L2 Literacy Development and Tasks:

In 1992 Jeng-Da arrived in America with no English speaking skills and very basic writing abilities. He had already studied EFL for two years and was able to write the alphabet and read basic stories. Jeng-Da describes his compulsory EFL courses in China as very teacher-centered where students were allowed to speak only when granted permission. His EFL readings consisted of translations of

Chinese folk tales and history, for as he explains, these were easier for the students to understand since they already knew about these. At this time, though, Jeng-Da explains that he "did not really like English" and that he did not yet know that he would be coming to America (Interview 2/8/96).

Upon arrival in America in 1992, Jeng-Da was placed into an ESL program with Walnut Grove High School--a very rough city school comprised mostly of one ethnic minority. The samples of ESL work he has preserved from that time are indicative of his very basic English literacy. For example, his collection of assignments/tests from 1992 include: five US map tests requiring correct abbreviations, six American culture and holiday activities (mostly matching and fill in the blank tasks), six reading assignments with video counterparts (with fill in the blank "main idea" comprehension tasks), and several exercises in dictation, vocabulary building, and basic English idioms. The texts he was given to read range anywhere from one paragraph selections to reproductions of stories out of the children's Little Golden Books series. Any writing exercises he did were limited to one word or very short answers on tests and manipulation of vocabulary words. One possible evidence of creative writing or of dictation, written seven months after his arrival in America, is limited to: "This week on Thresday the month will change to october. In the month octo America will Columbus day and halo day." Clearly the tasks Jeng-Da had to fulfill this year were basic literacy tasks, and so his L2 literacy was basic.

Jeng-Da's second year in school--his first in mainstreamed English--demanded more elaborative and more cognitively challenging reading and writing tasks. The tasks he was exposed to included several vocabulary exercises (cloze exercises with first letter clues and matching), grammar transformation exercises (working with verb tenses and sentence structure), dictations, True/False and multiple choice "Essay" questions on class readings, and a few Fox 28 Kids Club puzzles. This year both the length and the complexity of his reading and writing tasks increased. For example, his reading tasks ranged from WH-questions on newspaper articles to the drama "Twelve Angry Men." Of these reading assignments Jeng-Da recalls, "If I didn't understand I went back to ESL teacher and he explained" (Interview 2/28/96). His writing tasks extended now beyond sentence level to paragraph writing and one page journal entries complete with teacher correction of all grammar errors.

In 1994, Jeng-Da completed tenth grade English and took eleventh grade English over the summer. Eleventh grade English consisted of more reading with vocabulary work with dictionaries. Jeng-Da described the summer tasks as somewhat more relaxed with movies "related to literature" every Friday (Interview 2/28/96). Grammar work consisted of sentence transformation and punctuation tasks.

In his senior year (1994-1995), Jeng-Da embarked on a more rigorous literacy course. His senior year readings included works of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Bernard Shaw (with accompanying worksheets with short and matching answer tasks). Writing tasks became more process oriented with the introduction of drafting, peer review, and pre-writing activities. The concept of audience is introduced, as are narrative, expository, and persuasive models of writing. One example of his writing (before grammatical corrections by his teacher) speaks of Jeng-Da's own awareness of his speaking skills at this time and illustrate his grammatical weaknesses:

> As a foreign students, study in high school thing doesn't looks profect for me. It's not the problem I learning and doing the same things as American students doing. The real problem that bother me is the language. It makes me doing things more difficulty and troublesome. I don't have much of friends, it's not I new here in this place, it is the language because as a friends it need often talk to each other to keep the friendship working but I can't talk that good and make mistake all the time when I speak. I don't felt shy. it just feel bad, sometime. I think if I knowing more and learning more of English may be things will change and getting better and I hope it will be better. (Narrative 1/4/95).

Later in the fall of 1995, Jeng-Da matriculated in State University. As a graduate of a local high school, he is eligible to apply for admissions. Like an uncle and aunt of his, he embarks on an SU college education. Jeng-Da entered the ESL composition program at the lowest (106U) level. In 106U, Jeng-Da completed four multiple revision assignments, four in-class writings, two timed exams, and four reading journals within a 10 week period. The course focuses on three rhetorical patterns: narrative, process, and comparison-contrast. Text readings, often unrelated, served as model rhetorical structures. Grammar exercises consisted of editing for sentence structure errors, participial adjectives, and passive vs. active exercises.

The current ESL composition course which Jeng-Da is enrolled in requires three multiple revision essays in response to literary texts. Four in-class writing exercises are completed which also focus on responding to short paragraph-length texts. Two exams are administered which require Jeng-Da to synthesize the literary texts in response essay form. About this course Jeng-Da writes, "In 107, I try to understand the stories and give response to the stories. It was response to different ways depend on the stories and require" (Reflection Notes 2/13/96). Jeng-Da explains that 107 is more difficult than 106 because he is limited to writing about topics related to the literary stories which are harder (Interview 2/20/96). In Jeng-Da's second tutorial in 107 he asks about how to incorporate responses into his writing. By his third tutorial, it is evident that he still has trouble supporting his response with textual examples. Jeng-Da says, "This story is hard to write about" (Tutorial #3 2/27/96). He is making extensive revisions between first and second drafts but minimal changes for final drafts. Grammatically he is struggling to control sentence bounds in his first paper but is managing them better in his second essay. Editing, though, in general is still a task he grapples with: he has problems locating his mistakes although he has been told which type to look for. In addition, his language still tends to exhibit a spoken quality such as contractions, sentence fragments, and informal word choice. Blanton diagnoses such a tendency as inadequate preparation for academic writing (p. 237). Overall, though Jeng-Da's writing skills are similar to those of his 107U classmates.

Although Jeng-Da himself sees he still has room for improving his English literacy skills, his progress over these four years is phenomenal. He has developed his writing skills from one word answers to beginning essay responses about short stories. Similarly, he is now reading and analyzing these stories on his own, whereas he began his English literacy development reading translations of Chinese folk stories he already knew.

Literacy Strategies:

Over the years, Jeng-Da has developed fairly complex strategies for reading and writing in English. When asked about his current writing processes, Jeng-Da replied, "I always tried to think the

essay as a whole, for instance, how I going to begin to write and how I going to finish up the essay in the end" (Reflection Notes 2/2/96). When asked about his reading processes, he employs a similar approach: he initially looks for vocabulary definitions and examples of ideas/problems presented in the text and then he reads through the text. He tries when he has time to read his content area material before the class lectures because this makes the lectures easier to understand (Interview 2/28/96). Jeng-Da explained that reading one chapter (approximately 12 pages) in his economics text book takes about an hour because he must read carefully to understand the text and check unknown words in the dictionary. When he reads a literary text for English 107U, however, he claims to spend considerably less time and to focus on contextual meaning rather than individual words.

University Interaction:

Not only has Jeng-Da's L2 literacy improved since his immigration, but so have his oral and communicative skills in English. In my 107U class, I have observed him several times participating in small group and class discussions. Jeng-Da recounted this progress in English oral communication when he explained that when he first arrived in America he was very shy and had to think first before opening his mouth to say anything. Now he says that although it was a bit uncomfortable the first few days of our 107U class, after getting to know his classmates and me, he felt comfortable participating (Interview #2 2/20/96). His sense of confidence is evident in his conscientious participation in class discussions.

Involvement in content area courses, however, is still a bit more overwhelming for Jeng-Da. Jeng-Da explained that his two content area courses (Economics 200 and Math 148) are much larger and less interactive than our composition course. His economic lecture group has several hundred students and his math course fills the auditorium (Tutorial #3 2/27/96). On February 29, 1996, I observed his Math 148 class. As the course instructor lectures and demonstrates problem solving on the overhead projector, there is not a lot of room for discussion and participation. On the day I attended his class, out of the relatively low attendance of approximately 40 students, only about five interrupted the instructor to

ask questions. Jeng-Da did not pose any questions but faithfully copied down the math solutions for the entire forty-eight minute period.

Discussion:

From these developments, one can see that Jeng-Da has made progress in English. Indeed, considering the responsibilities he balances between school, his family, and two part-time jobs, it is quite an accomplishment for a student to develop his literacy skills so radically in four years. However, one can only wonder how much greater his development would be if he did not need to focus so much on surviving in America. In her case study of an immigrant university student, Johns alluded to similar caveats for the immigrant student with familial responsibilities weighting heavily on the student and possibly forcing the student to drop out of school in the future (p. 196).

One, however, can wonder whether the type of instruction the immigrant student receives in secondary schools is competent in preparing them for future university studies. In Jeng-Da's case, less focus on multiple choice reading comprehension checks and more on reading awareness might have been helpful. Likewise, Jeng-Da may have benefited in learning to edit his own grammar rather than having his secondary teachers explicitly correct his errors for him. His understanding of draft revisions may also have better prepared him for academic writing if he had been encouraged to make more radical structural changes in his high school drafts rather than sticking to minimal changes.

Understanding this portrait of Jeng-Da's past L2 literacy development is important for future pedagogical decisions. Based upon the data gathered for this study, as his instructor, I was able to better understand his current writing and reading practices and work to redirect him to more efficient strategies. For example, I now see that it has been difficult for him to make extensive structural changes in revising his 107U essays, because for the most part, in his high school, drafts consistently mirrored each other structurally. Hence, I have consistently tried to focus his efforts in revising on global structural changes and paragraph development. Furthermore, having now seen the grammatical editing his high school teachers did for him, I now understand one reason why he has difficulty locating and correcting his own

errors. To combat some of his remaining grammatical problem areas (i. e. sentence structure, word form, and verb form), I have tried to supplement his 107U course work with self-study exercises and editing practice. Also, the difficulty he has had reading and interpreting our 107U texts makes more sense knowing that for the last four years he has been completing numerous matching and cloze exercises in hopes of discovering the "correct" main ideas of his texts. Blanton asserts that such searching for "right" and "wrong" text interpretations can ultimately defeat the inexperienced ESL reader (p. 236). So, I have continued to resist requests for my ("The Teacher's") interpretation of our texts and instead encouraged Jeng-Da to dig deeper into the texts until he has excavated his own understanding and response to the texts.

Future Literacy Directions:

For the future, Jeng-Da defines his own English literacy goals:

> I think the goals to improving my reading and writing in English in the future is to stay in school and take more English classes as much as I can. Finding a job after school could be another way to improve my speaking skill in English. As a writer and reader in English after five years from now I hope I can be more literate in writing and reading in English . . . I don't know how to be a literate person which is the answer I try to looking for in the future. (Reflection Notes 3/2/96).

No doubt, Jeng-Da has come much closer to finding that answer of what it means "to be a literate person" in English these past four years. His uncertainty of what his literacy goal really is, is understandable at this early stage in his academic development; it will become clearer as he nears the threshold to his chosen academic discourse community. He will have to learn to read academic texts within the contexts of his own background knowledge and read and interpret them more efficiently (He may later find 12 pages/one hour cumbersome). Should he continue into engineering, he will need to apply skimming and scanning strategies to collect accurate information quickly from volumes of journal articles in his field. Likewise, he will need to learn to synthesize facts and figures in written summaries and proposals where eventually "the teacher" will not be his only audience.

Conclusion:

Based upon the information gathered in this study, it has been possible to take a deeper look into the literacy background and development of one immigrant student at the start of his college career. Jeng-Da's literacy growth from the time of his arrival in America until now has been shaped by the demands of adjusting to a new culture, managing his family, and completing basic literacy tasks. Jeng-Da's adjustment, however, is not as complete as it could be bearing on the fact that he is almost continually surrounded by Chinese culture at home, at work, and with his Chinese classmates. Maintaining this tight cultural bond has in some cases hindered his development from survival to academic English by restricting his access to BICS English rather than opening opportunities to improve his CALP English (Cummins 1983). On the other hand, based on current research on L1 literacy transfer, his Chinese literacy should also facilitate his acquisition of English literacy (Bell 1995, Carson et al 1990). Only time will tell how he continues to manage this delicate balance.

Pedagogical Implications:

Recognizing such a struggle for literacy development as Jeng-Da's is important to furthering immigrant education in America. Although his case is certainly unique, in many ways it reflects his 107U classmates' own stories of struggles to learn English and adapt to life in America. Pedagogically, at least four implications rise out of this individual study for academic ESL instruction.

First, since most immigrant students enter the university bearing little or no information about their literacy development, it would be beneficial to elicit this information from the students. Such methods as interviews, student literacy autobiographies or historical portfolios of past ESL course work could serve to draw an initial portrait of the learner's literacy background.

Second, L2 language proficiency of immigrant students might be measured in some way comparable to international student testing. Such assessment should include measures of both ESL reading and writing skills.

Third, once an academic course is set for the student, steps should be taken to expose the immigrant learner to the delicate differences between survival and academic English. When possible, strategies for academic achievement might be explicitly taught to provide scaffolding during the transitional stage from survival to academic English.

And finally, ESL instructors should be sensitive to the extraordinary responsibilities ESL immigrant students bear. Unlike most international students, very few immigrant students are free from familial and societal demands. ESL course work, therefore, should not be cumbersome and mechanical but rather facilitative and empowering. After all, the tasks the immigrant faces should lead him beyond basic literacy and not further hinder an already long and difficult struggle.

Data References

Interviews with subject on: February 8, 1996

February 20, 1996

February 28, 1996

Reflection Notes by subject dated: February 2, 1996

February 13, 1996

February 26, 1996

March 2, 1996

Subject's Writing Samples: Free Write from February 5, 1996

Narrative from January 4, 1995

Reading Writing Self Portrait from January 4, 1996

Tutorial #2 with subject on February 8, 1996

" #3 " " on February 27, 1996

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